



Asher Wolf

[Follow](#)

Cryptoparty founder. Amnesty Australia 'Humanitarian Media Award' recipient 2014.

Nov 5 · 10 min read

## Coconet S.E. Asia Digital Rights Camp

### Interviews With Nine Digital Rights Activists



Coconet Digital Rights Camp.

Some of the most committed digital rights activists don't hail from the places most Westerners would look for bolshy gusto in online rights activism. You won't find many of them in your hackerspaces and conventions in Berlin, London or SF. You have to go further afield.

**You might not have heard of them before. But many are leading digital rights activism in Asia.**

When 120 activists and advocates from South East Asia met in Yogyakarta, Indonesia for Coconet S.E. Asia Digital Rights Camp, I was able to interview a number of participants.

The camp was hosted by EngageMedia, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), and the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), along with key regional allies including SafeNet (Indonesia), Empower (Malaysia), Thai Netizen Network, Witness, Myanmar ICT

Development Organization, and the Cambodia Center for Human Rights.

The attendees at Coconet Digital Rights Camp work as journalists, human rights campaigners, safety and sexuality educators, security trainers and are working to protect internet rights. They are documentary makers, writers, social media enthusiasts, artists—and in many cases, accidental activists.

They have been subject to ongoing surveillance. Some have received veiled or outright threats, and faced online harassment, abuse and hacking. Others have been repeatedly arrested, and spent time in jail. Some participants have worked with political activists who have been murdered.

The camp hosted an outspoken feminist and LGBTQI contingent; a running joke about the formation of the “glorious RCP” (the “Revolutionary Coconet Party”, named in honor of the camp); an unexpected recital of Tibetan opera; and a spontaneous choir who decided to perform ‘Do You Hear The People Sing’ from the musical *Les Misérables* on the last night of the camp.

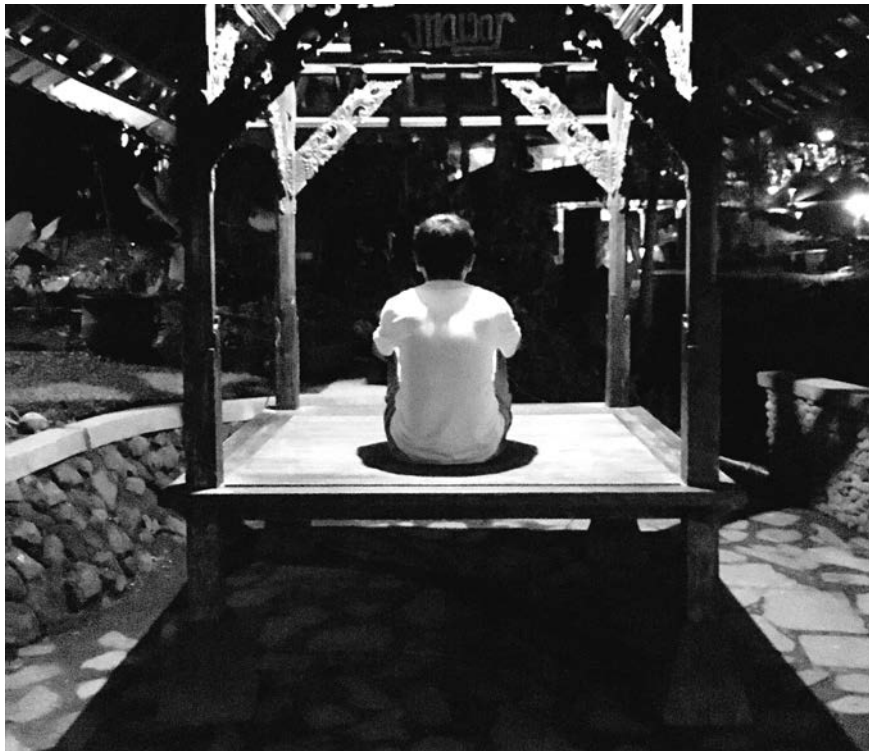
In the downtime of meal breaks, participants compared repressive country policies and competed to out-do each other in fashioning creative ways to use tongue-in-cheek humour to comment on the dismal state of politics and politicians in their home countries.

The training and discussion sessions at Coconet Digital Rights Camp were designed and run by the participants. Sessions covered a wide range of issues, including training on documenting human rights abuses, video editing skills, a campaign-skills lab and privacy, security and safety training.

S.E. Asian digital rights activists are working for change—with or without the rest of the world. It’s time to start paying attention.

*Note: some names have been changed to protect the privacy of participants and are indicated as such with an asterix. Interviews have been shortened for the sake of brevity.*

## Tenzin\*, Tibetan in Dharmasala. Digital security trainer and pentester.



Tenzin.\*

*I am from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, but to be honest, right now I don't have a precise address. I have to travel between Dharmasala, Delhi and Bangalore [for work.] So I don't have a proper address.*

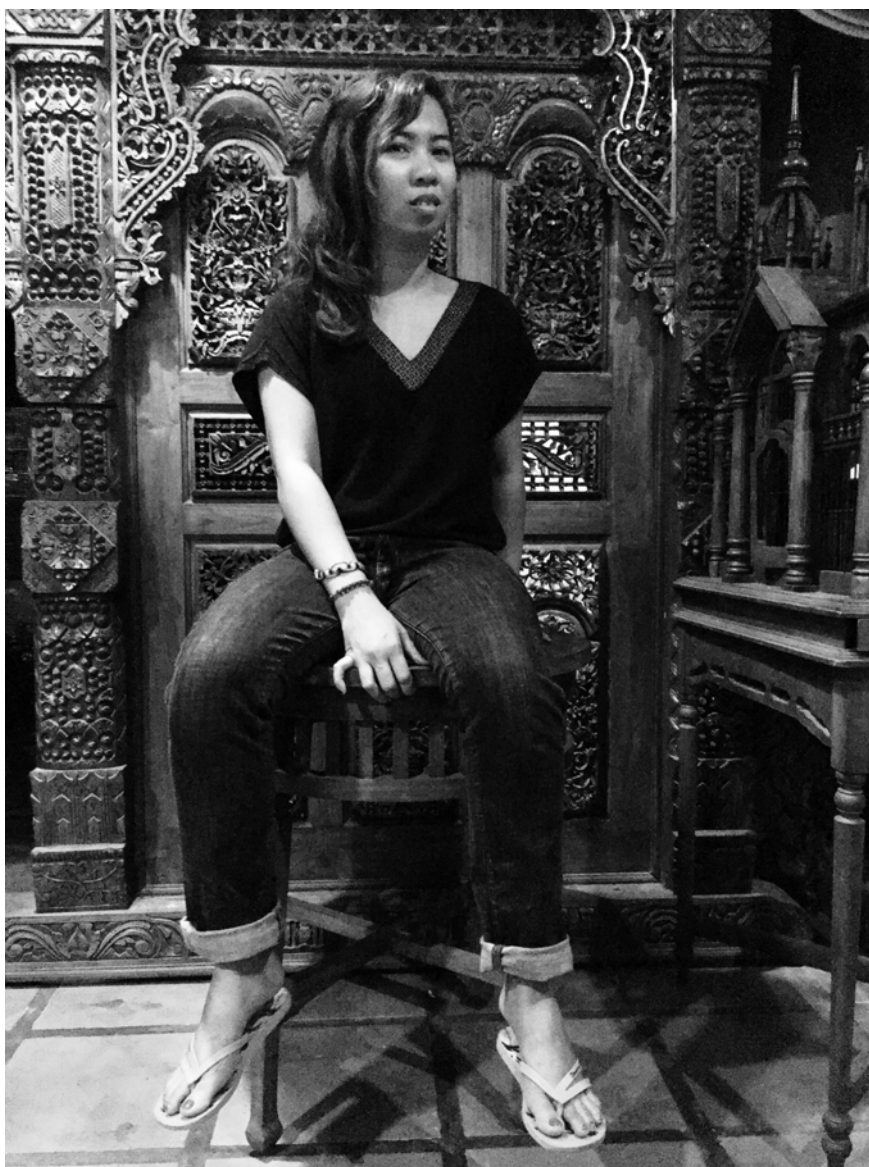
*I am a red team pentester, but I have started to work with the Tibetan community as a webmaster plus sysadmin. But my hope is to find work as a pentester, so in my spare time I still pentest.*

*At the start I think I didn't consider myself an activist, but perhaps by default being a refugee made me an activist. By default again I become the digital activist, because I have to train my people how to message or exchange email by secure method, and so I end up a digital security trainer.*

*Before I came here [to camp] I felt my people faced the most challenging situation, but after interacting with other people and hearing their*

*problems I know we should not give up.*

## Nica, Phillipines. Digital rights activist.



Nica.

*I started out as a digital rights activist when there was this new law in the Philippines known as the cybercrime law. One of the issues I was working on at the time was technology-facilitated gender-based violence.*

*When you read the text of the law it doesn't address sexual abuse online—it criminalises sex online. So at that time I realised there was a serious*

*issue with gender-based digital violence, but also I should be looking at the bigger issue—and that was digital rights.*

*One of the things I encountered when we were trying to map out domestic surveillance in the Phillipines and run some events, someone from the intelligence agency actually visited our office and asked for our securities and exchange registration number—it's what shows you're a registered non-profit or charitable organisation. We still pushed through with our events planned though. It was just strange. They could have easily have gotten the information elsewhere. The reason they showed up I think was they wanted to show us "we are watching you."*

**Maung Saungkha, Myanmar. Poet and digital rights activist.**



Muang.

*I am from Myanmar. I wasn't an activist before I was in prison.*

*In November 2015 I was arrested for posting on Facebook a poem about the President. Poetry. The poem was just four lines. I wrote it and posted it on Facebook and after that—they arrest me.*

*Yes, you can read my poem, it is still on the internet. The government put me in jail for seven months.*

*After that I became an activist for digital rights, protesting the telecommunications law.*

*I am trying to amend that law, for one year now. They [the government] have amended it, but I am not yet satisfied. I want to abolish online defamation. We have a penal code that is a remanent of colonial British law.*

*I was seven months in prison for a poem. Unbelievable*

**Gita\*, India. Digital rights activist and security trainer.**



Gita\*

*I was working with an environmental rights organisation as soon as I got out of college, but it felt as if I knew nothing about the lives of the issues of the Indigenous people I was working with. I would be coming into their lives from the city and I felt like an intruder.*

*So I was working on Indigenous rights, and we did digital rights and security training, because many Indigenous activists were under constant surveillance.*

*Then I realised I was a better fit in the digital rights space, giving trainings to organisations, because it fit better with the politics of not appropriating other people's causes.*

*The Aadhaar card? Each activist you speak to about the Aadhaar card [Indian biometric identity card] will bring up different issues. It's a mess.*

*You don't see results very soon with activism sometimes. It takes years for some things to move. And it's intimidating to be in a space that is filled with much older men. But I think you get better with dealing with that with time.*

**Furhan Hussain, Pakistan. Online security trainer, free speech and privacy activist.**



Furhan.

*For the past six years I have been associated with digital rights, security trainings and various other advocacy efforts in my country. As internet penetration has grown in Pakistan, so has the government's interest in controlling it, because that's where all the people are talking to each other, and even sharing dissenting views.*

*It was an accident, my inclusion into the digital rights field. I was in academia and working with non-profits and was very active on Twitter and my views were often very dissenting and not very desired by a number of people, and so a digital rights activist approached me, she DM'd me and she said "I think you need digital security." At that point I had no idea what digital security would entail.*

*And so that was the start of my journey. After that we had the first digital training and I really enjoyed it and so they saw some potential in me and asked me to begin writing for their organisation.*

*Pakistan has been strongly held in the past by the military. Even now that we have democracy, decisions are heavily influenced by the military. Always being a bit of a security state means there is this urge to control the public narrative. Religion and nationalism are two things that are sometimes used to influence people into submitting to the desirable or wanted world-view narrative. Talking about religion is an absolute no-no. It cannot just result in prosecution, but can also cause you to be attacked by a mob. It puts a great amount of pressure onto you not to discuss religion.*

*We've seen journalists who've discussed sensitive issues get a lot of flame and flack, and we've seen people have been abducted and disappeared forcibly. Bloggers have been abducted and disappeared. They were tortured.*

*There's things we're fighting for that have been achieved by other countries. It's good to learn from others and learn how we can achieve those things too.*

*It's very important to stay connected with others so we know what the new threats are and how we can tackle them, especially with digital security which is such a fast evolving field.*

**Han Hui Hui, Singapore. Social welfare activist and digital rights advocate.**



Han Hui Hui.

*I started writing a blog in 2007, and I started talking about my college life. And that got me into a lot of legal trouble. In 2013, I was 31 years old when the government finally used tax payers money to threaten to sue me for defamation.*

*Yeah, I do feel scared, because after I received a letter of demand from the*

*government they amended the defamation laws. I started organising social events every single month to raise awareness about social issues, like healthcare, housing and transportation, and because it's Singapore—there was no protest culture. We had to teach people how to protest, from the very start.*

*In 2015 six of us were charged. I went to court without any legal representation, without any legal aid, against the court-ordered State Prosecutor. In 2016 the government used the judiciary system to disqualify me from standing for parliamentary elections. Three months ago I was deported from Malaysia. There's a law that if you've ever been deported from anywhere you can't stand for parliamentary elections in Singapore.*

*My latest arrest? I was jailed because I went to protest against the government policy on public housing. I tried to make people take note of the situation,—and then I posted on Twitter and news sites covered the story.*

**Sneha\*, India. Sexual health advocate and educator.**



Sneha\*

*I think the digital rights in our movement in our country is fragmented, because it started originally as just digital rights and then merged with the other movements in our country.*

*My intersection with digital rights issues comes from my interests. I began in other human rights work and then began working extensively on access to information, and looking at what happens when you have access to technology and how that improves access to information.*

*Currently I work with an organisation that also looks at access to information about sexuality—that's something that you can barely find in India. We hope that we can use digital stories to help women from other sections.*

*The most difficult part of the movement...I work with women with disabilities. I identify as a temporarily-abled bodied woman—and the difficulty then becomes what kind of women with disabilities have access to information?*

*I find it upsetting that their [women with disabilities] presence is almost lacking in most cases and so the digital rights movement is exclusionary because of lack of access. A movement that was supposed to be inclusive is exclusive.*

**Paige, Phillipines. Journalist and International Studies student.**



Paige.

*There's a national ID system in the works in the Phillipines. But it has a lot of issues around it because our government isn't exactly the best at encrypting and protecting data. Recently the voter registration details of*

*the people have been leaked. The national ID system is such a big thing because...we don't really trust our government to properly protect our data.*

*Digital rights touches all of our causes, all of our different movements...so it's important to take it seriously because it effects so many core issues.*

**Wensislaus Fatubun, West Papua. Filmmaker and human rights defender.**



Wensislaus Fatubun.

*My name is Wensislaus Fatubun, you can find it online, in articles about West Papua. I learnt to be an activist from my grandmother, my grandfather, my family. I was born and grew up in Papua.*

*The problem is the Indonesian military. I think the Indonesian authorities know who I am. You can use my real name.*

*The last two years I am a representative, you know, to represent my West Papuan people to the U.N. Human Rights Council, for my people. I have been doing lobbying and diplomacy for my people to the U.N. Human Rights Council.*

*I know that I already put myself in danger with my choice to be with the West Papuan independence movement. But I understand the situation—so I cannot stop. I must continue with our struggle for West Papua to be free from Indonesia and colonial rule.*

*I use the internet for campaigning and to share information, to build solidarity and a perspective from West Papua. We're fighting to stop colonised rule.*

*I really want to bring this West Papua experience and stories so people will know why we want to be free. I think without the internet it would be very difficult.*

*When we have good internet access it is really good to support our struggle. But the problem is internet access in West Papua is really limited. And the other problem is the internet is controlled by the authorities. It makes it hard for our work.*



